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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR ADDRESSES PHILIPPINE SURVIVORS OF
BATAAN AND CORREGIDOR

Classified By: Ambassdor Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador offered keynote remarks at an April 7 ceremony honoring surviving Filipino veterans of Bataan and Corregidor. The event, held at the Philippine Shrine of Honor atop Mount Samat in Bataan, was attended by Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, high-ranking Philippine military leaders, and the Japanese Ambassador. In separate discussions on the margins of the ceremony, President Arroyo and Armed Forces of the Philippines Chief of Staff Gen. Alexander Yano spoke with the Ambassador about the ongoing Red Cross hostage crisis, the peace process in the southern Philippines, and other key bilateral matters. In both her prepared remarks and in private conversation with the Ambassador, President Arroyo expressed appreciation for a new USG program that will compensate Filipino World War II veterans who fought alongside U.S. troops. Arroyo also thanked the Ambassador for the Mission's helpful response to the ongoing crisis involving International Committee of the Red Cross workers held hostage by Abu Sayyaf Group terrorists on Jolo Island. General Yano outlined the delicate balance the AFP must find between maintaining pressure on ASG kidnappers while minimizing risk to the ICRC hostages. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Speaking extemporaneously in her keynote address, which she opened with traditional Tagalog salutations, the Ambassador expressed heartfelt thanks to the assembled veterans of Bataan and Corregidor, and to those who did not survive the bitter fighting of early 1942 and the terrible imprisonment that followed. Alluding to Easter, a primary national holiday in ASEAN's only Catholic-majority nation, the Ambassador described how fitting a time it was to honor "new beginnings borne of sacrifice," and "the triumph of joy over despair," and affirmed how the heroism of Filipinos who served alongside American troops had made possible a new era of cooperation among the peace-loving nations of Asia.

Arroyo Conveys Deep Appreciation for Help to Filipino Vets

¶3. (C) President Arroyo conveyed her nation's sincere appreciation to the Ambassador for the congressional effort that resulted in a recently-inaugurated program, included in the omnibus stimulus package, that will provide compensation to Filipino World War II veterans who fought alongside American troops in Bataan, Corregidor, and elsewhere. Arroyo expressed her displeasure and frustration with those who have publicly characterized the forthcoming aid to veterans as both ungenerous and overdue. The President alluded to a planned domestic "Volunteer Corps," similar to America's Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps, that she hopes will enlist 18-24 year-old high-school and college graduates -- many of them grandchildren of vets -- in strengthening the country's infrastructure and providing needed social services.

Delicate Balance in ICRC Hostage Crisis

14. (C) Referring to the ongoing crisis of International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) workers held hostage by Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) terrorists on Jolo Island, Arroyo privately thanked the Ambassador for the Mission's sensitivity to the complexities involved in the Philippine military's moves to cut off the terrorists' escape routes while minimizing risk to the hostages.

Primacy of ASEAN Engagement

15. (C) Turning to the subject of ASEAN meetings to be convened later in the week in Thailand, President Arroyo seemed resigned to spending Holy Week away from home. (The Philippines is the sole Christian-majority nation among ASEAN's 10 member states.) She recalled privately to Ambassador the logistical difficulties in arranging high-level ASEAN meetings during her own nation's 2006 turn as ASEAN chair, and expressed sympathy for Thai officials' predicament in having to play ASEAN host during a time of political unrest. Putting into perspective the importance she places on greater engagement with ASEAN, Arroyo observed resignedly that "we'll have other Easters."

Armed Forces' Perspective on ICRC Hostages

16. (C) In a separate conversation with Ambassador on the margins of the Bataan-Corregidor ceremony, Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Alexander Yano underscored the administration's frustration with critics

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such as Philippine Red Cross Chair Sen. Richard Gordon, and emphasized that the AFP would not accede to ASG demands that it withdraw from positions encircling the terrorist band on Jolo Island in the Sulu Archipelago. Yano affirmed that Philippine forces would continue to apply pressure to the ASG, while at the same time moving with great caution in order to minimize the risk to the two remaining hostages. He expressed hope for an absence of any violence during a de facto annual informal Holy Week ceasefire with terrorists and insurgent groups. Yano underscored how, as the hostage crisis has progressed, public opinion has clearly shifted in favor of military action against the ASG. The Ambassador stressed the importance of returning Jolo to the path of progressive and positive development. General Yano warmly acknowledged the solid support he had received throughout the crisis from Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro, who he characterized as a responsible decision-maker who never second-guessed commanders on the battleground.

Political Posturing; Progress in Mindanao?

17. (C) Referring to likely presidential candidate Senator Loren Legarda's apparent support of baseless and inflammatory accusations leveled by Senator Francis Pangilinan at U.S. troops involved in the upcoming Balikatan exercise, Yano opined that strange political posturing will become increasingly common in the leadup to 2010 presidential elections, adding that Legarda was someone controlled by her political ambitions. Yano declined to endorse anyone among the field of prospective presidential candidates, noting his duty as a soldier to remain aloof from politics until his June retirement. Turning to the AFP's pursuit of renegade Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) bands in central Mindanao, Yano acknowledged President Arroyo's frustration at the difficulty in apprehending rogue MILF commanders Umbra Kato, Abdurahman Macapaar (a.k.a. "Commander Bravo"), and others, but asserted that even if outlaw MILF leaders were never captured and brought to justice, the AFP's efforts in Mindanao had significantly degraded the MILF's military strength and provided added incentive for their early return to peace talks.

Who's Next as AFP Chief?

18. (C) Yano, who will step down as AFP Chief June 13, was noncommittal regarding whether he might seek political office after retirement -- perhaps as a Congress member from Dipolog, in his native Zamboanga del Norte Province in Mindanao. He was more forthcoming, however, on the subject of his possible successor, and clearly seemed to favor Philippine Army Commanding General Lt. Gen. Victor Ibrado, while noting that Southern Luzon Commander Lt. Gen. Delfin Bangit's assumption of the position would pose problems due to his lower seniority.

KENNEY